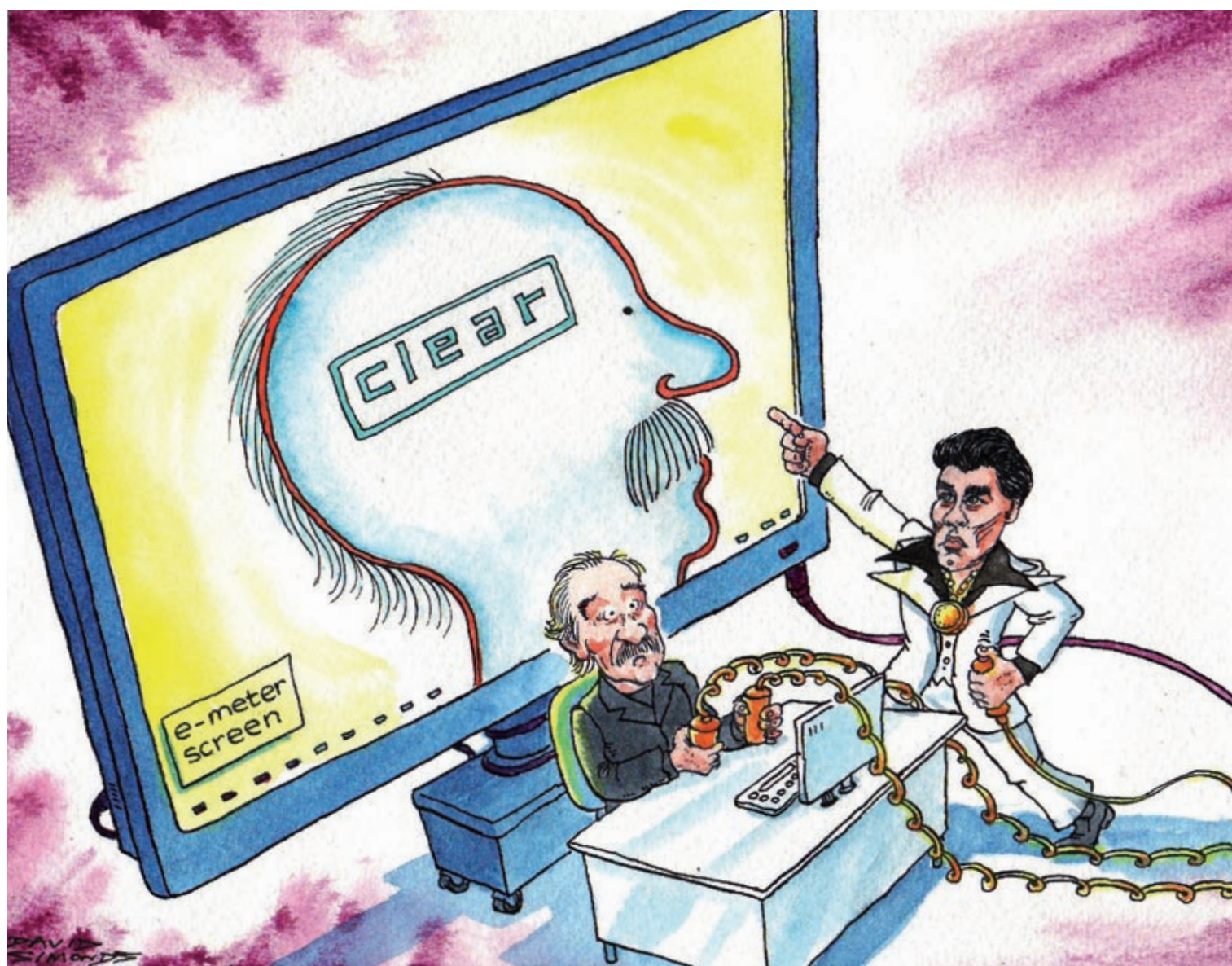




RANTS & RAVES

Resisting all attempts to be brainwashed by kooky cults, **Mel Croucher** resolves to clear his desk and his desktop without clearing his mind or his bank account

CLEAR FOR A YEAR



MEL CROUCHER RAVES

How cluttered is your system's desktop? If it's anything like mine, the image on your monitor is strewn with multicoloured icons that look like pavement-vomit. As for the physical desktop on which my monitor sits, I can hardly remember the leather-tooled dignity beneath the pile of rubbish that has colonised its surface.

It is traditional to make New Year's resolutions at this time of year, and I'm determined not to

break mine. My promise is simple: I will keep my desktops clear, because a clear desktop is the sign of a clear conscience, and I fancy a clear conscience for a change.

To tell you the truth, my original resolution was to cut all trivia out of these *Rants & Raves*, but I have fallen at the first hurdle, as I ask you the following trivial question: what links John Travolta, Frank Zappa and the Poet Laureate? Give up? The answer is the word 'Clear'.

This trivial story begins in 1977, when *Saturday Night Fever* was released and John Travolta shot to international stardom, becoming

the most famous member of a techno-religious cult known as the Church of Scientology. One of the cult's brainwashing techniques was (and probably still is) to plug a gullible sap in to an electronic box of tricks and flick a dial to reveal how much Bad Stuff was in their brain. Then they told the gullible sap that the best way to get rid of their Bad Stuff was to give lots of money to the Church of Scientology. When they had got a good squeeze of money, the electronic box of tricks said the sap was 'Clear'. That is to say their bank account had been cleared out along with their intelligence.

It seemed to me that suckers who fell for this sort of hokum were responsible for the wealth and evil power of all churches since Zeus was a lad. And a man who shared this opinion was Frank Zappa, the greatest composer of the 20th century. As soon as Travolta used his new superstardom to proselytise Scientology, Zappa set to work on his opera *Joe's Garage*, in which a moron joins a spoof Church of Appliantology, wherein members shove electronic devices up their own arses in order to become Clear. I resolved to work with Frank Zappa from that moment on.

MOTION SICKNESS

Let's fast-forward several years, to where I found myself auditing Zappa's online empire. I was in a London hotel having coffee and figs with his wife and a brace of his exquisitely named kids, when word arrived that a new Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion, had been appointed. The link between these strands in my narrative is that not



only had I registered the Poet Laureate's internet domain name that same morning, but I also have photographic evidence of his desktop, which is the inspiration for my New Year's resolution. You see, the Poet Laureate is the ultimate candidate for being Clear. His desktop consists of a sheet of polished glass, through which he can see his own legs crossing and uncrossing as he works. There is nothing on this desktop other than a silver laptop computer, and I have a feeling that when the lid is raised there is nothing but another sheet of transparent glass inside. So join me in my resolution to achieve a clear desktop, and thus a clear conscience. Here is my very own 10-Step Recovery Program:

Step 1 Take everything that is not a computer off your desk and put it in a box labelled Dead Important. I'm including paperwork, photos, underwear, cats, crucifixes, buns, everything. Any items that belong to the person who used your desk before you should go at the bottom.

Step 2 Place the Dead Important box somewhere safe, such as at the back of a very dark cupboard.

Step 3 If you urgently need any item you have put in your Dead Important box, take it out, examine it and then put it back in again.

Step 4 Create a folder on your desktop, and label it Clear Off.

Step 5 Drag and drop every short cut icon on your desktop into this folder, except your Wastebasket.

Step 6 Replace the electronic wallpaper that remains on your desktop with an image of John Travolta and/or The Poet Laureate, to remind you to keep it clear this coming year.

Step 7 Unsubscribe to all the email newsletters, community sites, scheduled alerts and other electronic garbage that seemed interesting at the time but that you never actually read.

Step 8 Use your regained time to contact old chums, new chums, your children, the church of your choice or that cat that seems to have gone missing.

Step 9 If you miss any of your desktop icons or cyclic communications, postpone reinstalling or resubscribing to them for a day, a week, a month, a year. They'll be out of date by then anyway.

Step 10 On New Year's Day 2009, delete the Clear Off folder from your system desktop, and throw away that cardboard box labelled Dead Important.

As a reward for trying to stay Clear For A Year, you can allow yourself one precious item on the otherwise clutter-free surface of your desk. It should be an item that is either intrinsically beautiful, or that inspires reflection, or maybe amusement. I have already chosen mine. It's a Frank Zappa album cover, with a hand-written message of encouragement and affection, signed by his widow just before she fired me.

KILLER APP



MEL CROUCHER
RANTS

A great man once said that there are only two computer games in the world: chess and ping-pong. Actually, the great man was me, but I've lost a bit of weight recently. I maintain that every computer game that has been rehashed, repackaged and remarketed since the industry began has been a combination of those two basic ingredients.

The fact that all electronic entertainment is based on this double-helix is not a limitation.

There are limitless ways of mixing the strategies of chess with the hand-eye coordination of ping-pong. Which is why I find the same old shoot-'em-up themes pitiful. When it comes to the money lobbed out on the development of games machines and software, I sneer. As for the unquestioning acceptance of violence as entertainment, I despair.

GENERATION GAMER

The average computer gamer in the UK is a 33-year-old male, which means he was conceived in the year Atari introduced Pong to the world and so has been influenced by computer games for his entire life. When he was first exposed to the joys of video entertainment, images were little more than crude blocks of primary colour, and audio was limited to bleeps, rasps and crude white noise. In fact, when our average gamer was growing up, an arcade game or home computer entertainment looked and sounded like the contents of the playpen from which he had just migrated.

Now, of course, the images offered by computer games are stunningly realistic, and it is possible to simulate individual hairs, skin pores and beads of sweat. As for audio, they use digital samples of the real thing and have already achieved near perfection.

But the actual gameplay hasn't progressed since the early days. The player still kicks the shit out of the enemy by proxy of a simulated hero or heroine on a little screen, and our average gamer has never been allowed to question the premise that violence is the solution to problems and that killing equals winning.

This is bad education for children and rotten conditioning for adults, and it can have done our average gamer no favours in the 33 years of his average life. It is like putting him on stage, handing him a Fender Telecaster and turning the spotlight on him, only to encourage him to use his instrument to smash the brains out of the rest of the band in the belief that this will make him the best musician.

BUSH WACKED

On 18th June 2002, President George W. Bush made a speech in Washington DC in which he said, "When we talk about war, we are really talking about peace." Yes, I know George Orwell put very similar words into the official mouthpiece of the regime he predicted would rule America and Britain, but Bush probably didn't realise he was quoting from literature. The fact is that when he

uttered those words, he had already accepted the advice of his cronies that war overseas really is the pathway to peace in America, and he went and proved it the following year. It was then only a matter of time before the justification for invading other people's countries and computer games became one and the same thing, under the slogan: "War is a game." That time is now.

America's Army: True Soldiers runs on the Xbox 360. It is the official computer game of the US Army and its marketing slogan is: "There's strong, and there's Army strong." As I write this there are 8,758,000 registered players, and an average of two million virtual rounds are fired every day to kill virtual enemies. I am not sure which of the Real Heroes are human, because they all look like avatars. Neither am I sure which computer-generated characters are fake, because they all look real. I think that may be the point.

What I am sure of are the seven core values that this army recruiting game declares it teaches. These are Honour, Selfless Service, Integrity, Personal Courage, Loyalty, Duty and Respect. They bear an uncanny resemblance to the Girl Guide promise, apart from the fact that Girl Guides also promise to love God and serve the Queen. The Girl Guides website encourages its members to achieve these splendid personal qualities though the path of global awareness and the celebration of diversity. America's Army recommends strapping on an M16, invading Afghanistan and calling in the 82nd Airborne.

It comes as no surprise that this US Army recruitment play uses the latest role-playing techniques that are usually seen in medical simulation software. First you've got to get through your basic training in single-player mode; then you can give or take orders to other 'players' depending on the rank you've won. Then something called a Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2 Game Engine kicks in, allowing multiplayer action, so that when casualties get shot or blown up they bleed to death in real time.

I wonder if our average UK gamer will learn how long it really takes for an enemy to die, or whether he will simply click a button for an instant replay. He has now reached the age Jesus was when a previous bunch of space invaders occupied the Middle East, and 33-year-olds have been playing war games ever since. It is only in our generation that the fake game and the real war have actually merged. ☑